An Investigation on the Effective Strategies and Challenges for Promoting Bilingualism in Young Children in the Libyan Society

دراسة حول الاستراتيجيات والتحديات الفعالة لتعزيز ثنائية اللغة لدى الأطفال الصغار في المجتمع الليبي

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2024

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Abstract

Children naturally possess the capacity and aptitude to acquire multiple languages during their formative years, displaying a significant interest in language acquisition. This is a major concern and a motive for some parents for their children to become bilingual. Various factors, including the age of the child, exposure to different languages, and social interactions, play crucial roles in shaping their language skills. This study revealed different strategies and challenges. The strategies can be parent's efforts in addition to school help. The challenges are finding a good school for the children's education, financial factors and time-consuming factors.

Keywords: *Bilingualism, Language Acquisition, Language Learning, English as a foreign language (EFL)*

يتمتع الأطفال بطبيعة الحال بالقدرة والاستعداد لاكتساب لغات متعددة خلال سنوات تكوينهم، مما يُظهر اهتمامًا كبيرًا باكتساب اللغة. وهذا مصدر قلق كبير ودافع لبعض الآباء ليصبح أطفالهم ثنائيي اللغة. تلعب عوامل مختلفة، بما في ذلك عمر الطفل والتعرض للغات مختلفة والتفاعلات الاجتماعية، أدوارًا حاسمة في تشكيل مهاراتهم اللغوية. كشفت هذه الدراسة عن استراتيجيات وتحديات مختلفة. يمكن أن تكون الاستراتيجيات عبارة عن جهود الوالدين ومساعدة المدرسة أيضًا. تتمثل التحديات في العثور على مدرسة جيدة لتعليم الأطفال والعوامل المالية والمستهلكة للوقت.

Introduction:

Child bilingualism is when a child can effectively communicate in two languages daily. Studies show that being bilingual from a young age brings various cognitive, emotional, and social advantages. Koppel & Storm (2014) demonstrated that cognitive inhibition plays a vital role in enhancing creative problem-solving on tasks that require remote associative thinking. Studies suggest that bilingual learning can foster the development of cognitive inhibition, leading to improved convergent thinking skills. It is now understood that children raised with two languages are not confused; rather, they display linguistic creativity like code-mixing, showcasing their cleverness rather than any sense of bewilderment. Children typically acquire their first language (L1) organically without direct parental guidance, yet they can acquire a second language with parental support. Certain parents express their apprehension regarding raising bilingual children. They worry that bilingualism might impede their children's language progression, potentially causing delays and cognitive challenges. Some parents fear that their child's proficiency in their native language could diminish due to early exposure to a second language.

The concept of bilingualism is multifaceted, considering variables like age of language acquisition, sequential versus simultaneous language learning, and the degree of fluency attained in each language. Simultaneous bilingualism refers to children who begin

learning two languages from infancy until approximately the age of one, whereas sequential bilingualism describes situations where a second language is introduced later during childhood (Tabors, 1997). This nuanced understanding of bilingualism is crucial when examining concerns related to its impact on children's language development. Parents may question whether bilingualism leads to language delays, cognitive deficiencies, or weakened mother tongues. Such worries highlight the complexity inherent in studying bilingualism across diverse populations and circumstances (David, 2004).

In Libya, English is regarded as a foreign language. In the governmental schools' context, the English as a foreign language (EFL) program is taught in English classes, mostly three or four hours a week from elementary school to High school. EFL is not used in daily communication. In the past, teaching English in Libya began in primary school. However, nowadays, most schools, national and international schools, and the private sector are trying to compete in teaching English in an interactive way. Furthermore, parents are trying to make their children fluent in English, because of the variety of schools; it is becoming easier to find a school with an English language medium.

Most of the parents in Libyan society express a strong desire for their children to learn the English language, to become bilinguals. Therefore, schools in the private sector have begun implementing new curriculums to help boost English language learning as a means of encouraging the younger generation towards being better to compete with the global community for the present and the future. Furthermore, the schools and parents are giving attention to ensure students' English language proficiency through an emphasis on bilingualism.

Raising a bilingual child provides numerous benefits throughout their cognitive, emotional, and social development. Some key advantages include cognitive enrichment when bilingual children exhibit improved cognitive flexibility, focusing abilities, and problem-solving skills due to the exercise of their brains switching between languages (Bialystok, et al., 2012). Furthermore, several studies have suggested that bilinguals show certain advantages when it comes to social understanding and tolerance. Bilingual children often display better social understanding and tolerance for other cultures, playing more easily with children from different backgrounds (Bialystok & Senman, 2004; Goetz, 2003; Kovács, 2009).

In addition, one of the key advantages of early bilingualism often overlooked is that bilingual children will acquire proficiency in multiple languages, which is beneficial for travel, employment opportunities, and communication with extended family members, preservation of family culture and heritage, and fostering friendships with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Apart from the evident linguistic benefits, researchers have explored whether bilingualism offers additional non-linguistic advantages (Akhtar & Menjivar, 2012).

This paper is an investigation on how parents are dealing with their children in order to raise them bilingually. This research strives to help parents and researchers to have a common knowledge about the strategies and challenges of dealing with bilingual children.

Objectives of the Study:

The aim of this paper is to investigate how parents manage raising their children bilingually, in the Libyan context. Furthermore, it attempts to examine various studies and resources that shed light on their approaches, attitudes, practices and challenges.

Scope of the Study:

The participants of this study were bilingual parents and monolingual parents who demonstrate concern towards their children becoming bilingual.

Research Questions:

In order to achieve the previous objectives, the study attempts to answer the following question:

1. What are the most effective strategies for promoting bilingualism in young children?
2. What are the challenges that parents in the Libyan context face in order to raise their children bilingually?

Literature Review:

The exploration of bilingualism in the Libyan context presents unique challenges, particularly given the limited existing literature. However, the increasing demand for raising bilingual children is evident both in Libya and globally, driven by the numerous benefits associated with bilingualism. Research indicates that bilingual children experience advantages such as enhanced economic opportunities, improved social and emotional health, cultural preservation, and greater academic success (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). This trend has led to the emergence of non-native bilingual parenting, where parents raise their children to be bilingual in a language that is not their native tongue. This practice involves intentional decisions by parents to communicate with their children in a foreign language rather than their own, thereby creating a bilingual environment that promotes proficiency in the target language (López, 2023).

Non-native bilingual parenting is characterized by parents who choose to speak to their children in a target language within a predominantly monolingual context. Yamamoto (2001) describes families engaged in this practice as "interlingua families," emphasizing their potential to provide a bilingual environment through deliberate language choices. Szramek-Karcz (2014) further defines Non-Native Bilingualism as a scenario where parents share a native language but choose to communicate with their child in a language that is not their own. This distinction highlights the challenges and motivations behind raising bilingual children in contexts where the community language differs from the parents' native languages.

~~There were~~ Several previous studies focusing on Arabic-speaking children learning English as a second language have demonstrated that early exposure to a second language does not negatively impact their first language development. For instance, research conducted in Saudi Arabia with 46 Arabic-speaking female students revealed no adverse effects on their Arabic reading and writing skills despite being exposed to English from an early age (Aldosari & Alsultan, 2017). Similarly, an Egyptian study found that learning English

positively influenced fourth-grade students' Arabic reading and spelling accuracy (Hussien AM 2014). These findings suggest that early exposure to a second language can enhance overall linguistic capabilities rather than hinder them. Furthermore, recent research from China indicated that children who began English education at age three had significantly higher chances of excelling in both English and Chinese examinations (Chen S, Zhao J, de Ruiter L, Zhou J, Huang J ,2020). This underscores the cognitive flexibility of young learners and their capacity to acquire multiple languages efficiently.

Additionally, parents raising bilingual children often employ various strategies to foster language development within monolingual contexts. Key strategies include:

1. Early Introduction: Introducing a second language as soon as possible, ideally before formal schooling begins.

2. Consistent Exposure: Providing regular opportunities for interaction with the second language through conversations, books, media, and other resources.

3. Positive Reinforcement: Creating a supportive environment that encourages engagement with the second language and celebrating children's efforts (Jaumont, 2017).

Baker (1995) discusses the common challenge of maintaining balanced proficiency levels between two languages, noting that one language may dominate over time. This imbalance can lead to preferences for one language over another, complicating efforts to achieve bilingualism.

The literature reveals several challenges associated with non-native bilingual parenting. Parents may face skepticism from others regarding their choice to raise children in a non-native language, leading to feelings of self-doubt (King & Fogle, 2006). Additionally, achieving balanced proficiency is often unrealistic; most bilingual individuals exhibit varying degrees of fluency across languages. While existing studies provide valuable insights into strategies and challenges faced by parents in different contexts, there remains a gap in research specifically addressing bilingualism within Middle Eastern settings like Libya. Future investigations should engage more comprehensively with contemporary studies and theories relevant to this region. A critical examination of conflicting viewpoints or challenges within the existing literature would also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of bilingualism.

To conclude what has been mentioned, a foundational understanding of bilingualism and non-native bilingual parenting has been provided; however, it highlights the need for deeper engagement with contemporary research specific to Middle Eastern contexts. Expanding the scope of inquiry could enhance our understanding of the unique dynamics at play in raising bilingual children within these environments. The interplay between cultural factors, parental motivations, and educational practices warrants further exploration to inform effective strategies for promoting bilingualism in diverse settings.

Methodology and Data Collection Tool:

This research is a qualitative research with semi-structured interviews. It involves conducting in-depth interviews with the parents using a pre-determined set of open-ended questions. This type of research was chosen because qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems (Moser, 2017).

However, this tool was time-consuming. It was not possible to meet the parents face to face; as a result, parents were interviewed virtually through online meetings. The sample of this study were 15 parents; most of them were bilingual except for two. The parents were interviewed in three categories, pros and cons of bilingualism, challenges, and the strategies that help their children in learning two languages. These categories are related to the research questions.

Sampling Process:

The participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that targets individuals who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research question. In this case, the focus was on parents who are involved in raising bilingual children.

Participant Selection Criteria

1. **Bilingualism**: Most participants were bilingual, which was essential for understanding the dynamics of raising children in a multilingual environment.

2. **Parental Involvement**: Participants were selected based on their active engagement in their children's language development, ensuring that they could provide meaningful insights.

3. **Diversity Considerations**: While the current sample consisted of 15 parents, primarily bilingual with only two monolingual participants, future studies could benefit from including a broader demographic. This could involve:

   o Recruiting parents from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds to capture a wider range of experiences.

   o Including parents with different educational levels and socioeconomic statuses to understand how these factors influence language acquisition strategies.

Interview Categories

The semi-structured interviews were organized around three key categories aligned with the research questions:

1. Pros and Cons of Bilingualism

   o This category explores the perceived benefits and drawbacks of raising children in a bilingual environment.

2. Challenges Faced

   o Parents discussed various challenges they encounter in fostering bilingualism, including societal attitudes, educational resources, and personal experiences.

3. Strategies for Supporting Language Learning

   o This section focused on the methods and practices parents employ to help their children learn and maintain proficiency in two languages.

The following tables illustrate the interview questions with the parents involved in this study.

Pros and cons of bilingualism	parent response
1. Tell us about the advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual. And are you and your partner (husband/ wife) bilingual or monolingual?	
2. Do you think it is better or worse for your child if they speak two languages? Why or why not?	
3. How do you think speaking two languages will affect your child's language development?	
4. How do you think speaking two languages will affect your child's intelligence?	
5. If your child had a language delay, how would that affect your decision to teach him or her two languages?	

Challenges that parents face	Parent's response
1. What are the difficulties of making the	

child learn a second language?	
2. Is it financially consuming?	
3. Is it time-consuming?	

Strategies that helping their children in learning two languages.	Parent's response
1. What strategies (if any) are you using to help your child learn to speak two languages? Where (from whom) did you learn this strategy?	
2. If you have more than one child, how have these strategies changed from child to child?	
3. How do you think your strategies might change as your child gets older?	
4. Do you think it's better to speak only Arabic at home, only English at home, or both Arabic and English? At school? Why?	
5. What language enrichment activities does your child do/attend outside of school and home?	
6. If you practice reading and/or writing at home with your child, what language(s) do you practice reading and writing in?	
7. Who would you ask for advice if you suspected your child was having trouble learning a second language? Why?	
8. What information or resources would be helpful for you as	

you raise a bilingual child?	
9. do you think that making your child study in governmental, national, or international will affect his /her level of proficiency the language?	

Discussion & Findings:

The data collected from the parents was helpful and informative. It was interesting to collect information from the parents who provided an abundance of interesting views and details. A brief discussion of the parents' responses is illustrated in the tables.

Pros and cons of bilingualism	parents response
1. Tell us about the advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual. And are you and your partner (husband/ wife) bilingual or monolingual?	Regarding the first question almost all of the parents agreed that there are no disadvantages of learning a second language and illustrated different advantages like good job opportunity and that their children will be open to learn from other cultures and have lots of knowledge. The parents were 13 bilinguals. 10 of them were bilinguals (speaking English) with their partners and 2 of them were monolinguals.
2. Do you think it is better or worse for your child if they speak two languages? Why or why not?	Most of them agreed with this however one of the parents insisted that their child must know more than the basics of his/her mother tongue and focus on the Islamic culture. Then the second language can be addressed after that.
3. How do you think speaking two languages will affect your child's language development?	Some the parents commented that it will lead to improvement to their learning process. Some of them commented that bilingualism might negatively affect their first language in the form of a delay in writing or reading sometimes.
4. How do you think speaking two languages will affect your child's intelligence?	Most of them commented that it will make them smarter thinking in 2 languages
5. If your child had a language delay, how would that affect your decision to teach him or her two	Some of them commented on focusing on first language first with extra efforts like private lessons and extra learning strategies while neglecting the second language. Some of them suggested extra effort and teaching resources for both languages.

languages?	Some of them were not aware of the idea and said that they will ask experts.

Challenges that parents face	Parent's response
1. What are the difficulties of making the child learn a second language?	Parents expressed different difficulties regarding this question such as finding the right school with the right learning environment and the time and exposure of the children learning another language
2. Is it financially consuming?	All of them agreed that it is really financially consuming some of the monolingual parents said in order of their children to speak more than one language they had to let them enroll in international school and bring some private teachers for extra practice at home.
3. Is it time consuming?	All of them agreed that it is time consuming for bilingual parents to provide an English supportive environment at home.

Strategies that helping their children in learning two languages.	Parent's response
1. What strategies (if any) are you using to help your child learn to speak two languages? Where (from whom) did you learn this strategy?	Most of them commented on the language exposure in school and through watching YouTube videos, in addition to, speaking the language with parents and relative at home. Some parents who have experienced in teaching English use some teaching aids like flash cards and stories. Some monolinguals and also bilinguals commented that they make use of private English lessons.
2. If you have more than one child, how have these strategies changed from child to child?	The same strategy for all.
3. How do you think your strategies might change as your child gets older?	Some of the parents commented that it depends on whether the level of their children is increasing or not. There might be some changes of course.
4. Do you think it's better to speak only Arabic at home,	Some of them explained that both are really important. While others commented that it is important to speak only in

only English at home, or both Arabic and English? At school? Why?	English. A third group of the parents do not prefer speaking with their children in a language other than Arabic.
4. What language enrichment activities does your child do/attend outside of school and home?	Most of them commented "Nothing just school activities"". Some commented that traveling to a foreign English speaking country helped a lot as their children had the chance to interact with others.
5. If you practice reading and/or writing at home with your child, what language(s) do you practice reading and writing in?	Most of the bilingual parents and actually most of them commented on the practice in both languages. Other bilingual parents whose children are in an international school ~~where all of the curriculum is in English~~ are not really concerned with practicing Arabic at home.
6. Who would you ask for advice if you suspected your child was having trouble learning a second language? Why?	Experts and Professionals in this field
7. What information or resources would be helpful for you as you raise a bilingual child?	Speak the language with them more and expose them to the target language frequently. These were the recommendations of most of the parents.
8. Do you think that making your child study in governmental, national, or international will affect his /her level of proficiency the language?	Some of them said international and national schools are really helpful alongside the parents' role at home. Some of them commented that parents at home play the most important role due to the children acquiring the language from them.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for both parents and educators in Libya, particularly in the context of raising bilingual children. The interviews reveal a spectrum of parental attitudes toward bilingualism, with some parents demonstrating a strong commitment through substantial investments of time and resources, while others appear less concerned despite their own bilingual capabilities. For instance, one parent fluent in Russian and English expressed a lack of engagement in using these languages with her children, highlighting a disconnect between parental proficiency and active language use at home. Similarly, another couple proficient in English and French struggled to integrate these languages into their children's education, relying heavily on school instruction rather than fostering bilingualism at home. This disparity in parental involvement raises critical questions about the motivations and barriers that influence language acquisition in bilingual families. Many parents expressed skepticism regarding the high costs associated with international schools, suggesting that they believe effective bilingual education can be achieved through dedicated parental effort combined with

support from educational institutions. This perspective underscores the need for accessible resources and strategies that empower parents to actively participate in their children's bilingual development without incurring excessive financial burdens.

Recommendations for Parents and Educators

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to bridge the gap between research and practical application:

1. **Parental Engagement**: Parents should be encouraged to actively incorporate their target languages into daily routines through conversations, storytelling, and media exposure. This can create a rich linguistic environment that supports language acquisition.

2. **School Collaboration**: Schools should foster partnerships with parents by providing workshops or resources that equip them with effective strategies for supporting bilingualism at home. This could include guidance on integrating language learning into everyday activities.

3. **Affordable Language Resources**: Educational authorities should consider developing affordable language programs or community initiatives that provide access to bilingual education without the financial strain associated with private institutions.

4. **Promoting Language Use at Home**: Parents should be encouraged to adopt strategies such as the **One Parent One Language (OPOL)** approach or **Minority Language at Home (ML@H)** strategy to ensure consistent exposure to the target language within the family context.

5. **Utilizing Technology**: Leveraging technology, such as language learning apps or online resources, can provide additional support for both parents and children in maintaining language proficiency.

Areas for Further Research

Future research could further enhance understanding in this field by exploring:

- **Longitudinal Studies**: Investigating the long-term effects of various bilingual parenting strategies on children's language proficiency and academic success.

- **Diverse Demographics**: Examining the experiences of families from different cultural backgrounds within Libya to gain insights into diverse approaches to bilingualism.

- **Impact of Socioeconomic Factors**: Analyzing how socioeconomic status influences parental choices regarding bilingual education and access to resources.

- **Educational Policy Evaluation**: Assessing the effectiveness of current educational policies on supporting bilingualism in Libyan schools and identifying areas for improvement.

Conclusion

To promote successful bilingual development, collaboration between parents and educational institutions is essential. Prioritizing a second language like English, which is widely used globally, should be a key focus for parents aiming to enhance their children's future career prospects and educational opportunities. This study has illuminated various strategies employed by motivated parents as well as the challenges they face in raising bilingual children. By addressing these challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, stakeholders can significantly improve the bilingual landscape in Libya, ultimately benefiting future generations.

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